



Congregational Life

Boards, Vestries and Councils – What’s the ideal?

by Joyce Madsen

February 2008 Issue Contents

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What would the ideal leadership team look like today? Who would be a member and what role should they have? What would the agenda include? These are questions that we keep hearing as congregations struggle to find ways to function effectively. So, let’s paint a picture of how an ideal Board or Vestry might function.

Selection

We have to begin with who the members of the Board should be. It is not enough to have warm bodies that volunteer to do a task. It is critical that each member have a passion for the role they play and a vision for the life and work of the congregation. This will make it more difficult to find people, but having members that are excited about their role and share a vision for the congregation makes it worth the effort.

It may be time to reduce the size and change the structure of your Board. When Bill Easum took over Collonial Hills Methodist church, he reduced his Board to seven members. His argument was that the others were needed for ministry, not to sit in meetings. A smaller Board or Vestry is better able to make the difficult decisions that will inject new energy and ideas. Changing the labels for standing committees can create new perceptions.

What if the worship committee is made responsible for spiritual development, for example? That sets a

new context for thinking about Sunday morning as a time when the emphasis is on practicing the presence of God.

What if Sunday School becomes Children’s Ministry? That broadens the task considerably.

Setting up short-term task groups or teams can create pockets of energy that can be the catalyst for other ministries to get started. Think about what it is you want each to accomplish, and design your committee and task force structure with that end in mind. You’ll be surprised as the creative ideas begin to emerge.

When someone agrees to serve in a leadership role, they have to put the needs of the overall organization ahead of their specific committee or pet project.

The best way to identify the right people is to listen as folks share their stories and listen for what it is they are most excited or passionate about. If no one is excited or passionate about the congregation’s ministry, that is a sign that it is time to make significant changes. When you hear someone with passion, find an opportunity for them to

share their enthusiasm with others.

Role of the Board/Vestry

It is the role of the congregation’s leadership to be clear why the congregation exists – what it is God is calling the congregation to be and do. Kirk Hadaway, speaking in Lethbridge last year, insisted congregations should be about transforming lives and creating



This issue’s theme ...

Leadership in the Congregation

People need an opportunity to experience the Holy!

God's new community. It is the role of leadership to provide the resources and support that will enable a congregation to live out its role.

One way to provide focus, support and accountability is for the board or vestry to take the time at the beginning of their term to identify the goals they would like to accomplish over the next year. A board that sets overall goals provides a foundation for the clergy leadership and committee chairs to know where it is they should focus their energy.

Don't try to set too many goals – three would be our maximum. Make them challenging, energizing, and exciting as well as achievable. The result will be a congregation where everyone is working toward the same end. This releases people and groups to work independently and in a way that works best for them, while knowing they are making a meaningful contribution to the congregation as a whole.

Board meetings can then become places to celebrate accomplishments and find support for work to be done – not just places for re-hashing old issues or time absorbing trivia. The focus can be on the future, not the past!

Meetings

How often a board or vestry has to meet depends on the tasks that they are trying to accomplish. Today technology enables us to share information easily. We can use e-mail, websites, Skype, or even Facebook or Myspace as ways to stay connected. (Skype.com lets you talk long distance free over the Internet using only your computer and a headset.) Google now provides many services that enable us to share information over the Internet. Busy people need new ways to stay in touch.

When a Board or Vestry meets it should be a time of transformation. The people involved need an experience of the Holy. They need to feel they are in a caring, supportive community. They need to feel that the work they are doing is contributing positively to significant ministry.

Setting an appropriate agenda for a Board or Vestry meeting is important.

Charles Olsen in his book *Transforming Church Boards* says that meetings of congregational leaders should be times of worship. It's not just about getting the business done, it is about discerning what God is calling the congregation to do.

What might a Board or Vestry agenda look like? Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Welcome and acknowledge everyone.
- ◆ Time to share with one another about what is happening in your lives.
- ◆ A reflection time using a scripture reflection, book, or special reading.
- ◆ Provide time for significant centering on why it is we meet and work together. This could include prayer in a form that allows everyone to participate, whether that be through silence, song, or shared words. (This time is best led by one of the members, not always the clergy or paid leadership.)
- ◆ Business that moves you forward. Reports should be shared prior to the meeting so that everyone is aware of what has been accomplished and time is not spent on reviewing past actions. (Caution: Many boards review the financials in detail every meeting. If the reports indicate that the financials meet the plan passed at the AGM, it is not necessary to revisit them every time you meet. If they don't – develop a plan and put it into action, don't keep rehashing meeting after meeting.)
- ◆ Before you close share with one another how you are feeling about the time together. Then close with a thank you and blessing.

Meetings should never last more than a couple of hours. Most people run out of creative energy after that. Being creative is not just one element of your meeting – it is what your meeting is all about.

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An event for your
Board or Vestry

New energy — new perspective — renewed leadership

Everything we read today says congregational health is about leadership, leadership, and more leadership. The Board or Vestry of a congregation plays a vital role in providing this leadership. Developing leadership is freeing, energizing, liberating, engaging, and opens the way for real growth in the congregation. Think what that would mean for your church!

Edmonton

Thursday March 27
3 hours: 7-10 p.m.

Calgary

Friday March 28
3 hours: 7-10 p.m.

Call the Congregational Life Centre at 780-619-0386 or 438-6016
or e-mail clair@congregationalife
to reserve a place for your Board or Vestry at one of the events.
The cost: \$200 per Board/Vestry.

Q & A Time

Question

What is the ideal ratio of staff for different numbers of people in a congregation?

Answer

The key criteria for staff to congregant ratios is "Do you want to grow?"

The ratio of staff to congregation is informed by Arlen Routhage's insights around congregational size. He found that a congregation of 100-150 people is the maximum size that can be supported by one clergy. The book *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell says 150 is the maximum number of relationships a leader can maintain. It is something that is hard-wired into our brain.

Today people are attending worship less often and have less time to contribute as volunteers. A more realistic number in a congregation would be one staff for every 100 members.

I would suggest you think in multiples of 100. If you have 100 people (including children) you

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can likely manage with one staff person; 200 people would require 2 full time staffers.

If you want to grow, then the equation changes. A new program or ministry requires extra staff. If you have a congregation of 200 people and 2 full time staff and make the decision to introduce a Small Group Ministry or an additional worship, it would be our recommendation that you hire at least a part time person to manage that new ministry.

Can lay people help? Of course. The more involved they are, the less paid staff will be required. But be cautious. Lay volunteers are busy people, and need staff support. There is no free lunch.

We do know that evangelical churches that are growing continually add staff. Most main-line congregations tend to balance a tight budget by reducing staff, which begins a spiral downward into decline. You have to staff for growth, no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

*If you have a question, e-mail
joyce@congregationalife.com.
We'll answer them all, and print the best.*

Singing in the Shower with Jesus

By James Strachan

The other night as I was watching the tube, I noticed that American Idol is about to start up again. I liken the “American Idol” phenomenon to the current fad for Big Box Churches. They are usually huge, physically. And glitzy, with showy bands, and shops and Starbucks as well.

Corporate boards not unlike department stores or oil companies run these churches. They employ flashy and articulate “help,” whose main goal appears to be packing in the crowds, so the cash flow remains high, and so that “ministries” can be moved forward. Many of these are related to recruiting members and keeping up the cash flow. Of course, they do some good work. They run youth clubs and inner-city rescue missions and house-building crusades.

My complaint with these religious behemoths is that they have little, if anything to do with the Way of Jesus! He taught people the Way. The genius of the Way of Jesus was that it was simple, it was face-to-face, and it carried out what God desired, according to Jesus.

The Way they were to follow involved very little of what we call, “religion.” They were to visit and heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, clothe the naked and feed the hungry. They were to gather in his name and share a simple, common meal. They were to study their Bible, which was the Hebrew Bible. They were to live out the Way he taught them. Nothing about what they should believe, or who they should



condemn – nothing about who was right and who was wrong. There was room for vast diversity in his disciple group. And when ‘religious folk’ challenged his ways, he told them the story of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. Remember the story? (Matthew 25: 31-46). Those who follow the way, Jesus reminded them – those who feed the hungry, visit and heal the sick, clothe the naked, spend time with those imprisoned – are doing these things *to God*, not just to ordinary people!

No huge hall, no glitzy pastor, no Starbucks, no band, and very little of what we call “religion.” They were to take Jesus’ talk and “walk it.”

Somehow, I think that razzle-dazzle religion is a lot like American Idol. People are dazzled by it. They get drawn in – maybe even conned – by it.

Most of us know, deep in our hearts, that real singing takes place in kitchens and in showers and bars, and in small congregations where people offer their best and it is accepted. I hope most of us know that real Christianity takes place in workplaces, hockey arenas, youth centres and Seniors’ Homes – and in the struggling fellowships where people still care about talking Jesus talk and walking Jesus’ walk.

Small Group Ministry



It’s the way of the future—the way to growth, energy, commitment, & spiritual depth.

Participation in this program will give you an understanding of the dynamics of small group ministry, experience in being part of a spiritually supportive group, and the beginnings of a plan to develop a small group ministry in your congregation.

August 11 – 14, 2008
Athabasca Woods Lodge